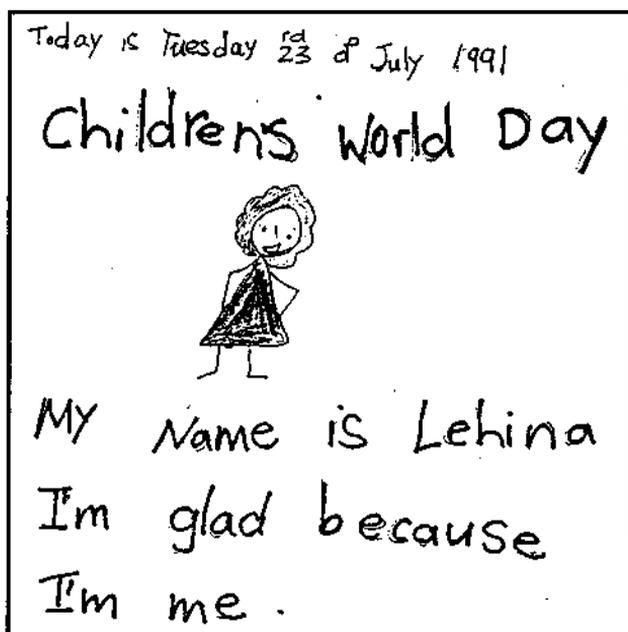


Literacy Development and the Pacific Child

Sereima Lumelume



Lehina is a Class 2 pupil in a rural school on Espiritu Santo in the Republic of Vanuatu. She lives a very simple life, as do all other Third World country pupils, and occasionally gets a glimpse of the modern world when tourists travelling in the passenger-liner, *Fairstar*, call in for a taste of the tranquillity and beauty of Hog Harbour.

Since June 1990, Lehina has been learning English through a natural, developmental approach. Prior to that, Lehina had to be coerced into rote learning through the South Pacific Commission/Tate Programme (SPC/Tate).

SPC/Tate model

This course was developed in the '60s as the early literacy programme for the Pacific schools. The development was in accordance with the belief that learning is essentially *habit formation*. Therefore language learning in schools was seen to emulate this behaviour where learning ought to be efficient, scientific, rigid and regimented with teachers controlling the process. This was a technology of reading that had its impetus early in the century, which gave rise, according to Goodman, Goodman, Smith and Meredith (1987), to the philosophy of behaviorism and logical empiricism where specificity, sequence and quantification became the watchwords.

This philosophy of learning that became popular in the '40s and '50s was adopted here as it was also thought to be relevant for Pacific teachers and learners. The philosophy has also greatly influenced the development of the first language programmes.

The consequences

Because of the belief of the relevance of the course for the Pacific, it has been sufficient to conclude that a person can be literate after 4 or 5 years of formal schooling through this rigid, regimented course.

Results of research and surveys conducted in Fiji and the region, have revealed the unrealistic, inappropriate nature of the model.

Such models only serve as Cambourne (1985) states:

"..... to maximise the probability that boredom, confusion, 'non-sense', and therefore joyless and ineffective learning (and teaching) will occur."

And for this to occur at the very outset of formal schooling is extremely detrimental to human development. Holdaway (1979) refers to such models as the result of the "fallacies of academic analysis".

Lehina's message

The message above pleads for recognition, for understanding, for thoughtfulness, for patience and tolerance, and for sensitivity and appreciation of the lifestyle of the Pacific child.

The message is crucial to literacy development; in particular to literacy developers who have preconceived ideas about the Pacific child.

What does the message mean for literacy learning and teaching in the region?

- . It means that rich and quality language programmes that follow natural, developmental approaches are crucial for the Pacific child;
- . It means that the rich oral traditions, the experiences and achievements that are meaningful, purposeful and dear to the Pacific child must be part and parcel of literacy programmes;
- . It means that literacy education courses and programmes for teachers must be reorientation programmes which focus on the natural ways of learning and which enhance realignments between teachers and learners.

One of the project teachers in the IOE/Ready to Read Project had this to say about rigidity and fragmentation, informality and development:

The Way I See It

The Ready to Read Programme has a much closer relationship between the teacher and the children.

The togetherness in shared reading story telling, dramatization and others are ways that effectively bring the warmth and closeness.

My experiences in both Tate and Ready to Read, is that in Tate there is always a valley between the teacher and the children. There is no freedom. It is too narrow. There is fear. It is a forced sort of learning.

(Leiwia Vocor, Vanuatu)

. It means, in Margaret Meek's words, that

"..... we owe it to our children (and people) to clearly understand what we mean when we say we want them to be literate."

References

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